

TEACHING ENGLISH THROUGH OPEN NON-FORMAL EDUCATION (ONFE) IN BANGLADESH WITH AN EFFECTIVE INTEGRATION OF ICT TO SUPPORT LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

The program entitled "English in Action (EIA)", 9 year period DFID funded project in Bangladesh, was launched in 2008, for the desire to bring a change in the learning of English language. EIA works to reach a total of 25 million primary and secondary students and adult learners through communicative language learning techniques and the use of ICT, textbooks and supplementary materials in an innovative way.

The project has been running, with the help of BBC World Service Trust and BBC Learning English, the program entitled "BBC Janala", an initiative that is providing English language lessons to citizens via their mobile phones as part of the wider English in Action program in Bangladesh. Survey research found that women are particularly interested in learning by mobile (especially given its "any time, any place" nature). That means, it is absolutely being implemented as a non-formal education (NFE) under the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) mode what is known as Open Non-formal Education (ONFE). BBC Janala allows Bangladeshis to access short (2-3 minute) audio lessons through a simple voice call by calling a four digit short code.

The program has been a real challenge as it has the ability to address the need of students with an effective integration of ICT to support learning. This paper discusses how one increasingly ubiquitous ICT device -the mobile phone- has become increasingly relevant to learners in Bangladesh, in various ways and contexts.

Keywords: Open schooling, English through ODL, ICT in open education, DE in Bangladesh.

INTRODUCTION

In Bangladesh, both government and non-government organizations (NGOs) provide open non-formal education (ONFE) to contribute in achieving various development goals. Bangladesh Open University (BOU), as government organization, is the only university in the country, which provides both formal and non-formal programmes under Open and distance learning (ODL) method. Its ONFE programmes are mainly for awareness building on 19 different issues (BOU Diary, 2010).

Once BOU used to broadcast ONFE programme on communicative English which were very popular among the common people (CEPL Prospectus, 1995). NGOs, in Bangladesh, are very active in imparting the non-formal education (NFE) programme using their innovative approach in different categories which are mainly conventional in nature. But NGO-run programme entitled continuing education (CE) uses face-to-face (f2f) contacts for limited times and learners complete their learning through self-learning materials (SLMs).

Therefore, CE is completely run under open and distance learning (ODL) mode. In NGO literature, this is called open non-formal education (ONFE) which has the characteristics of both ODL and NFE (Rahman & Panda, 2010). Both government (GO) and NGO ONFE programmes also use ICTs in some cases such as radio-TV broadcast, learning CDs etc.

Over the last decade or so, governments in the Asia Pacific region have been promoting the use of the new ICTs in education because ICTs are a means for meeting the challenges improving access to and promote equity in education by providing educational opportunities to a greater number of people of all ages, including the traditionally unserved or underserved (e.g. those in rural and remote areas, women and girls, and persons with disabilities).

In addition, ICTs can improve the quality of teaching and learning by providing access to a great variety of educational resources and by enabling participatory pedagogies (Ng et al, 2010). Bangladesh also puts emphasis on ICT-enabled education as a part of its implementation of 'Digital-Bangladesh' agenda. Along with the governments' interventions, development agencies are also very active to support Bangladesh through ICT integrated initiative at non-formal education level. Among them, Department for International Development (DFID) implements English in Action (EIA) Project aiming to provide English as a new technical skill to 25 million primary, secondary school children and adult learners using modern technology for contributing economic growth of Bangladesh by providing English language as a tool for better access to the world economy.

This paper examines English in Action (EIA)'s use of low-cost technology appropriate for the development of communicative English at the non-formal level with particular emphasis on open and distance learning in Bangladesh.

The paper also aims at reflecting DFID's major initiatives in this field. ODL at NFE level in Bangladesh has been reviewed, especially in the context of the present challenges and opportunities of use of ICTs and to identify sensitization against digital divide in Bangladesh. It also looks at how media and mobile technology can effectively help ODL to meet country's needs for developing communicative English.

OBJECTIVES

This paper is built around the following objectives:

- to examine the benefits of technology to delivery non-formal education for enhancing communicative English;
- to review the mobile technology as new educational media for supporting learning English at the non-formal level;

- to review the BOU policy and study the perception of BOU in introducing m-learning for its NFE programmes;
- to examine ways to combine the traditional and new media for cost-effective delivery of distance education courses;
- to consider the work of DFID in the development of ICT integrated as an emergent media in Bangladesh for supporting ONFE.
- to provide a model for replication EIA's courses at the BOU as this university is the only distance education provider at formal and non-formal level.

METHODOLOGY

This paper has been prepared on the basis of content analysis of information gathered from field experience reports generated by the baseline surveys by the EIA, published and unpublished sources, seminar/conference papers, newspaper articles. In some cases factor analysis also been deployed. In addition, informal and formal interviews were held with the EIA and NGO functionaries such as Campaign for Popular Education (CAMPE) and Friends' in Village Developments in Bangladesh (FIVDB), faculty members of English discipline of the School of Social Sciences, Humanities and Languages (SSHL) of the BOU. Internal documents, handbooks, brochures, newsletter, proforma letters, national policies (ICT and education policy) were carefully reviewed to draw conclusions.

DEVELOPMENT AND STATUS OF ONFE IN BANGLADESH

Spronk (1999) describes that NFE, in the ODL literature, perhaps, the most illusive and ill-defined worldwide. In the 1970s, the NFE emerged strongly and NGOs were the main players for imparting it. Fordham (1993) suggests that in the 1970s, four characteristics came to be associated with non-formal education:

- relevance to the need of socially disadvantaged groups;
- concern with specific categories of person;
- a focus on clearly defined purposes; and
- flexibility in organization and methods.

Subsequently, open universities extends its activities in NFE because of its flexible nature. Nanda (2003) states that most of the programmes offered by the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) fall within the spectrum of NFE and are very popular, as these are intended for self-enrichment and professional upgradation. However, IGNOU's reach-out policy in spreading mass education through distance mode must also reorient itself to the local conditions. Same as IGNOU, BOU also has the policy to offer NFE with its formal programmes what is called Open NFE. As of today, 19 ONFE programmes have been functioned, since its inception in 1992, using radio-TV broadcasts.

These are electronic media-enabled programmes, very flexible in nature, specific purpose oriented (mainly for awareness building), absence of formal curriculum and no certificate are issued. BOU has a long history of media use. Its establishment can be traced through a long process of media use in education. The BOU Act of 1992 was the culmination of almost fifty years of development in educational technology.

In 1956 the Education Directorate had provided 200 radio sets to educational institutions, and in the subsequent year the Education Reform Commission (ERC) recommended establishment of a correspondence school (UNESCO, 2002). An Audio-Vision Cell was set up followed by the Audio Visual Education Centre (AVEC) in 1962.

A School Broadcasting Program was established in 1978, and that pilot project was merged with AVEC in 1983 to form the National Institute of Educational Media and Technology (NIEMT). The NIEMT became the Bangladesh Institute of Distance Education (BIDE) and subsequently BIDE got merged to BOU in the year 1986. At present, BOU is running as a full-fledged DE institution in the country both for formal and non-formal education programmes.

Nearly seven hundred NGOs are providing NFE in the country and they became very professional. Because of their professionalism, the Directorate of NFE of the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education partners with them to impart NFE at the government level. BOU also partnered with NGO coalition, Campaign for Popular Education for implementing a pilot programme entitled Junior School Certificate (JSC) for grade 6-8 to mainstream NFE primary graduates of the NGO run Schools under their NFE settings. NGO run CE programmes are completely based on ODL approaches which are called ONFE. There, it is clear that, in Bangladesh, both GO and NGO are very active and professional in the field of ONFE. Because of the professionalism in providing NFE by NGOs, EIA also partnered with one of the leading NGOs named Friends in Village Development in Bangladesh (FIVDB).

TEACHING ENGLISH USING ONFE APPROACH

The program entitled 'English in Action', launched in 2008, for bringing change in the learning of English language targeting 25 million primary and secondary students and adult learners through communicative language learning techniques and the use of ICT, texts and supplementary materials in an innovative way. The project has been running, with the help of BBC World Service Trust and BBC Learning English, the program entitled "BBC Janala", an initiative that is providing English language lessons to citizens via their mobile phones as part of the wider English in Action program in Bangladesh. Survey research found that women are particularly interested in learning by mobile (especially given its "any time, any place" nature). That means, it is absolutely being implemented as a non-formal education (NFE) under the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) mode what is known as Open Non-formal Education (ONFE).

Like DFID, other NGOs trying to introduce the 21st century teaching approaches to the teachers and develop a student-centered environment in the classroom (RI-SOL, 2010). Relief International Schools Online (RI-SOL), keeping in mind the growing demand of English as the language of opportunity in the modern time and its contribution to meet growing demands of the 21st century, RI-SOL has launched the English Language Clubs across the schools in the Global Connection and Exchange Program (GCEP) for stimulating students' interest in the English language skills to empower them to communicate fluently and effectively and provide a platform for students to learn and enhance their skill in the four basic aspects of English language: *reading, writing, speaking and listening* thereby improving their performance and potential (RI-SOL, 2009).

This drew the attention of the government as well. Secondary Education Sector Development Project (SESDP) is piloting e-learning in 20 schools in urban and rural areas to support the teaching of English, Mathematics, and Science subjects (SESDP, 2010).

ICT-ENABLED TEACHING IN BANGLADESH

Bangladesh is rapidly progressing in the field of information technology since 2000 when, for the first time an IT policy was officially announced by the government of Bangladesh. This policy has already been restructured recently in consistent with the present government's implementation of the 'Digital-Bangladesh' agenda. Bangladesh has long experience of using electronic media, especially broadcasting, to support the school learning through the programme entitled "Shikharthi Ashor" (school broadcasting) on national radio. Over the years it has used radio along with its teaching method (Hossain and Muttaqui, 2006). The great achievements of BOU through its open and distance learning systems coupled with radio-TV programmes, audio-video cassettes, etc. provide a solid evidence that appropriate use of ICTs allow other organization to increase access, improve quality and cut cost-all at the same time. This educational revolution with the potential dramatic acceleration in English teaching at the NFE level brought through appropriate use of ICTs in the communicative English of the EIA.

EIA project, in its pilot phase, with the help of DFID, developed English courses which claim media support. The support at present is in the form of radio-TV programmes, non-broadcast audios and lessons for mobile phones. The support has been tested through baseline survey and found mobile support is of crucial importance as it is very low cost and it effectively reached to the learners. Quality and extended service is enabling EIA to produce better media material for reaching the majority of dispossessed masses since both radio and television has the potential to enhance the English teaching in the country. The EIA is, thus, contributing its share in this area like every open learning system has done in the programme delivery.

The importance of IT in the present day world has been taken into consideration by the EIA by launching BBC Janala suing media support in different realms of computer science. The ICTs are developed in English language keeping in view the facilitation and understanding target learners. These ICTs are pre-tested and improved. Second Language Acquisition (SLA) process has been very effective through permutation of mobile computing. The spread of telecommunication, internet and wireless technology is so dramatic that it took only a quarter century to earn the acceptance of the population of varied culture around the globe. The question is how technology is going to affect the SLA environment, pedagogy and learning? We must consider Bangladesh peripherally, limitation wise and ability of its people to spend after technological accessories for SLA (ELT World News, 2009).

METHODOLOGY USED

EIA uses the methodology where how one increasingly ubiquitous ICT device -the mobile phone- has become increasingly relevant to learners in Bangladesh, in various ways and contexts.

EIA English teaching programmes entitled *BBC Janal* and *Bishaash* being occurred outside the formal educational system such as schools, colleges and focus on practical skills and knowledge only and this is very much learner centered. Therefore, these two are NFE programmes. On the other hand, the methodology is based on the outreach and the distance education system. The ICTs are planned and developed according to the primer and course contents which are in turn developed based on the concept paper disseminated through national workshop/seminars.

The first writer attended one of the dissemination seminars as representative of the ODL institute. As the programme is under ODL setting a central monitoring team from The Open University visited to each nodal point containing all the ICTs for guidance, supervision, monitoring and evaluation. BBC Janala allows Bangladeshis to access short (2-3 minute) audio lessons through a simple voice call by calling a four digit shortcode.

The program has been a real challenge as it has the ability to address the need of students with an effective integration of ICT to support learning.

The aim is to use the most widely adopted and affordable media available - television- to reach out to the many millions of ordinary people who have poor or nonexistent English language skills and lack the confidence to learn. Children and adults of all ages are able to watch the drama series *Bishaash*, accompanied by a linked English-language learning show *BBC Janala: Mojay Mojay Shekha* (Learning is Fun) (BBC World Service, 2010). *Bishaash* is a drama based TV lesson captivates audiences whilst providing an introduction to beginner's English. With most of the speech in Bangla to attract a mainstream audience, it includes functional English lines woven into the stories. It is followed by *BBC Janala: Mojay Mojay Shekha*, an entertaining educational game show and comedy which builds on the English used in the drama, providing viewers with a fun, accessible and free way for families to learn English together.

Dial-up Lessons

Mixing Bangla and English is a proven way of drawing people in and improving English language comprehension. English in Action has made an innovative leap, using Buzz to generate interest in lessons that are available via mobile phone -Bangladesh's five biggest mobile phone service providers support the initiative. Bangladesh has one of the fastest growing rates of television and mobile phone ownership. Some 70 million people have a handset- "they're used by people earning as little as a dollar a day". Telecoms industry forecasters predict there will be 100 million mobile customers by 2015. "Mobile phones make a brilliant teaching tool: they're all about listening and talking."

Dial-up English lessons are three minutes long, but there are 49 hours worth of lessons available, with more being added. Lessons are initially focused on essential phrases for interviews, work, greetings and travel, for example, with strong emphasis placed on comprehension and pronunciation. Clarification, explanation and repeat options are available.

At the end of each lesson users are directed to follow-on courses, enabling them to expand the breadth of their spoken English as they "move up levels".

Within five weeks of Buzz being launched in October 2009, 1.5 million lessons had been accessed – proving the theory that engaging television content would stimulate interest in improving English language skills. Numbers are expected to jump dramatically when a new drama series, Bishaash, is launched in October 2010 (Mott MacDonald, 2011).

Supernatural Drama

With writers, directors and producers recruited from the UK's award-winning EastEnders soap opera, Bishaash has "an addictive story line with a supernatural twist, packed with romance and danger," John says. Action is set in Bangladesh's Dhaka and London's Brick Lane—at the heart of the UK Bengali community. "Bangladesh TV has never seen anything like it." Pilot programmes have received rave reviews. Initially all of the dialogue will be in Bangla, but with English subtitles. Episode by episode, more and more English dialogue will then be introduced. "But that's not the primary aim of the series," John explains. "In the story line there are constant references to the phone numbers – more than 3000 mentions throughout the series." (Mott MacDonald, 2011).

With regard to EIA's adult learning component, BBC WST has introduced a service, BBC Janala (www.bbcjanala.com), which looks to transform the way people learn language using technology.

Support is provided through mobile telephony where by simply dialing the number 3000 learners can access lessons ranging from: 'Essential English' for beginners, to 'How to tell a story' for those more advanced (Zaman, 2010).

CONCLUSION

BOU in support with the British Council first initiated to develop communicative language in the county through the teacher education. In their baseline survey, BOU counterparts and ODA consultants travelled different corners of the country for knowing the exact situation. In the dissemination workshop, former Dean, School of Social Sciences, Humanities and Languages of BOU expressed his experiences as under:

Professor Shamsul Haque and the consultant once both met one of the Managers of the Garments Factory to know how he communicates in English. They had conversation with the manager; in course of time he said: I want to drench your throat. Both of them could not understand. They asked to repeat. The manger repeated.

But same; finally they asked him to write down what he said. Then the Prof. asked- what do you mean. He said, actually I want to offer you a soft drinks. After that, the consultant wrote in his diary that the people in this county uses most of the time the bookish English and rigorous attempts should be taken for communicative languages.

In the recent past the very purpose of learning English has been changed in the context of Bangladesh. Since the beginning of the 90s, in Bangladesh, there has been a growing demand for using English as a foreign language (EFL) rather than as a second language (ESL) (ELT World News, 2010).

English in Action (EIA) also conducted baseline surveys and first survey also found the spoken English competency of most Bangladeshi students, teachers and community adults is at a basic level. Even after many years of schooling a lot of students had not progressed beyond the initial stage of speaking in English (EIA, 2009).

It is concluded that EIA initiatives have been very timely as it supports country's contemporary demand for both English teaching and digital goal of the present government.

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